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ABSTRACT

Many factors that contribute to a negative school climate also cause discipline problems. Our schools are "rigged," like gambling casinos, in that they must produce a certain percentage of losers. The present school system, in performing its screening role for society, demands that some fail. Students today are aware of this rigging and the unsuccessful ones often withdraw or rebel. The spiral of awareness of rejection, isolation, hostility, and acceptance of failure eventually leads to crime and violence. This spiral can be reversed at any point by intervention of a caring person. Administrators can substantially change the nature of schools and personally intervene in the lives of children. Nine ways in which schools are rigged include promoting successful students and detaining those who fail, relying on standardized testing, emphasizing competition, using artificial rewards and letter grades, grouping and ranking students according to ability, devising special courses for less worthy students, and limiting pupils' choices regarding their courses and teachers. The pupils' social systems, based on a rigid hierarchy of cliques, reinforces negative self-perceptions. With a modest amount of "unrigging," administrators can make a positive impact on school climate and pupil behavior. (Author/WD)

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UNRIGGING THE SCHOOLS

ONE APPROACH TO IMPROVING DISCIPLINE

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Eugene R. Howard

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UNRIGGING THE SCHOOLS

Eugene R. Howard

During the past few years I've been a thoughtful observer and student of a variety of processes for improving discipline and morale in schools. Such processes are always fascinating because they eventually cause people to examine critically the nature of the schools themselves.

I've come to the conclusion that if we are to make a substantial impact on discipline and morale in schools we must treat symptoms and causes simultaneously.

We need to treat such symptoms as high absenteeism, high failure rates, high drop-out rates, violence and vandalism, verbal disrespect to authority, and high referral rates and suspension rates directly and as symptoms. Very often we treat such symptoms by such means as improving provisions for security in buildings, by better defining the school's rules and regulations, by increasing the efficiency of the school's processes for dealing with disruptive behavior, truancy, or absenteeism. Such remedies are often badly needed and long over-due. They can be applied humanely and with due regard for student and staff rights and for due process.

Treating symptoms is important work, but it is not enough; we should also deal with the causes of our discipline problems; and many of these causes are rooted deeply in the nature of the schools themselves.

I have come to believe that we have designed schools which, at least in part, create the discipline problems we are then called upon to solve.

I say "in part" because we know that discipline problems may also be caused by conditions within our society and conditions within families. Evidence is growing, however, that schools make a big difference in the way pupils behave.

One recent study, (1) for example, showed that negative labeling by teachers was more strongly associated with delinquent behavior than any other of the ten factors examined, including negative labeling by parents. Another study(2) found that school-related variables are the strongest predictors of both dropout rate and delinquency for both males and females. Tracking has also been identified as a strong determinant of delinquent behavior in schools.

It is important, then, that we address the causes as well as symptoms of discipline problems as we define activities which will make an impact. Several of the policy recommendations in the Board of Education report do address causes.

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(1) Brennan, Tim and Huizinga, David, Theory Validation and Aggregate National Data: Integration Report of OYD Research, FY 1975, Vol. 12, Boulder, Colorado: Behavioral Research and Evaluation Corporation, p. 351.

(2) Elliott, Delbert S. and Voss, H., Delinquency and Dropout. Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath, 1974.

Many schools have found it productive to address causes of discipline problems through launching school climate improvement projects. This approach is becoming more widely accepted as problems limited to the remediation of delinquent-prone pupils continue to show disappointing results. It appears that we must remediate schools as well as learners.

A recent report of the State of Washington's Safe Schools Task Force (1) has concluded the following:

> "Safe Schools Task Force members unanimously agreed: an invigorating school climate - one that provides high levels of student/staff satisfaction and commitment to the school - is the most important element in reducing school crime.
>
> "In reaching this conclusion, Task Force members visited more than fifty schools throughout the state and, in most cases, school climate was reported to be the major factor in stabilizing behavior problems ..."

We can approach school climate improvement in three ways: (1) we can strengthen programs, activities, and project which are already contributing positively to the climate of the school (2) we can launch new projects carefully designed to contribute positively to the climate of the school, and (3) we can stop doing some of the things in schools which contribute to a negative climate.

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(1) Safe Schools Task Force, Recommendations to the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of Washington, Olympia, 1979.

I do not have time today to discuss in detail how we might deal with symptoms or how we might launch new programs and activities or strengthen existing programs and activities to improve climate. A variety of such suggestions are available in my book on the subject, School Discipline Desk Book.(1)

The Focus of This Presentation - The Unrigging Process

What time I do have, then, I'd like to spend on suggesting that we should stop doing some things in schools which contribute to a negative climate and which, in part, cause discipline problems.

In short, I am suggesting that a part of our efforts to improve discipline should be focused on unrigging the schools.

Perhaps it comes as something of a surprise to you that someone would suggest that our schools are rigged. Let me explain what I mean.

We say, for example, that a piece of gambling equipment is rigged against the player if, over a period of time, the house always wins and a certain percentage of players always lose. The odds can be manipulated - and in fact are manipulated so that players always win enough to be motivated to try again. But enough players lose to keep the casinos operating.

With a few important differences, our schools are like that. I believe that we have designed our schools in such a way that they, by their very nature, must produce a certain percentage of losers. Everyone can't win in school because the system demands failure.

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(1) Howard, Eugene R. School Discipline Desk Book, West Myack, NY, Parker Publishing, 1978.

I'm not saying that our system was designed to produce losers on purpose. No individual or group is conspiring to keep our schools in their present social-screening role. (1) It just happened that way. When, in the history of our country, we began to design a school system for our children, it just happened that we patterned our system after the prevailing European systems of the day - most notably the Prussian and English systems of the early 1800's. These systems were - and to some extent still are - highly rigged in order to maintain a highly rigid class society. The society was assured of a continuing lower class because the school system served a screening function. These 19th century European schools, and their American counterparts, served the purpose of separating winners from losers at a very early age, thus assuring a continuous ample supply of physical laborers for growing industries and for the military.

There are those who say that America's schools, in the last quarter of the 20th century, should continue to separate winners from losers, should continue its screening role for society. There are some real problems with this point of view.

First of all, our losers are smarter now than they were 100 years ago - or even 50 years ago. They are aware of what is happening to them. You are all familiar with what happens to the attitude and the self-esteem of children who come to school, eager to learn, and who begin to understand, at about the age of 10 that the school wasn't designed for them. They watch other people get the honors, win the prizes, get the praises, get the high grades. They watch themselves being labeled "remedial" or

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(1) i.e., determining who will and who will not be admitted into the mainstream of our society.

"special", being segregated, being told in many very subtle ways that they are second-class people. They see through some of the rigging. They react by withdrawal or rebellion.

How this cycle of withdrawal and rebellion works can be illustrated by this visual, (Figure 1-1) which shows Samuel Proctor's (Rutgers University "Spiral of Futility"[1]). This spiral begins early in a child's life when he or she first becomes aware that he or she is being rejected. The school itself gives some children this message because it has been rigged against them. The message is generally non-verbal. Nevertheless it is understood. Children react first by withdrawal. They then build walls around themselves to insulate themselves from the daily message of unworthiness they are receiving from their environment. It is possible that this message is beingsent to the child not only by his school but also by his home and by the street society. In some cases pupils will reinforce their insolarity by joining others in well defined out-groups or gangs.

As the cycle continues the insolarity is broken from within by acts of hositlity against the offending society. This hostility is accompanied by further withdrawal and the rejection by the individual of all the success symbols of the general society - the grades, clean clothes, middle class language, middle class morality. This stage is followed by acceptance of failure followed closely by crime and violence. The losers rebel by tearing up the school, defacing its walls, and assaulting other people. Initially, they will assault the winners. At a later stage, they will assault anyone.

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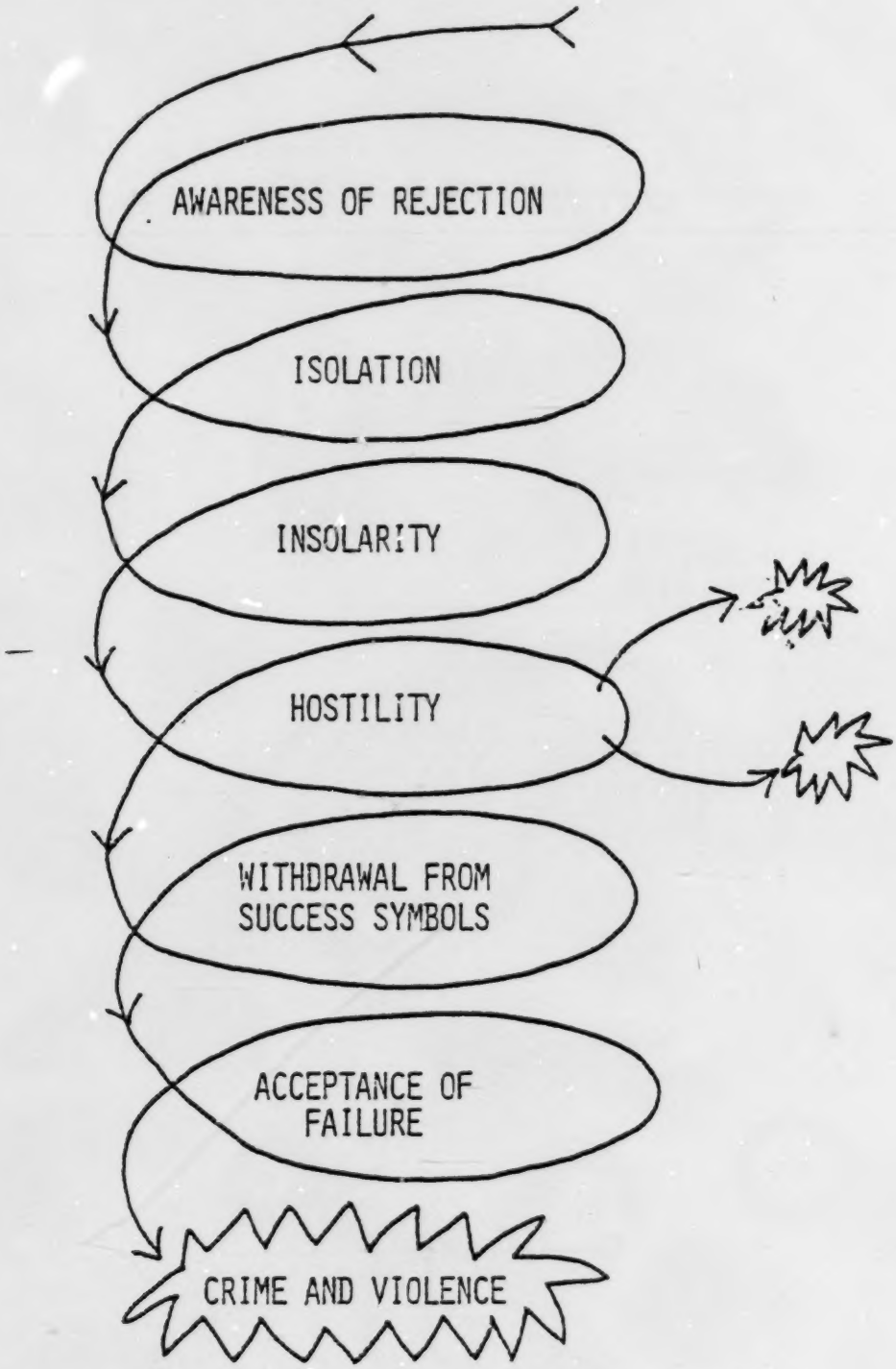
(1) Proctor, Samuel, "The Spiral of Futility" in New Dimensions for Educating Youth, U. S. Office of Education and NASSP, 1976, pp. 55-57. A report of a bicentennial conference on secondary school reform.

PROCTOR'S SPIRAL OF FUTILITY

FIGURE 1-1



THE SPIRAL CAN BE REVERSED WITH "ONE MAJOR INTERVENTION".

This is how, according to Proctor, our society creates its own discipline problems. This is the ultimate result of a rigged school operating within a rigged society.

Proctor also says that this process can be reversed at any point by "one major intervention". By "major intervention" he means one individual who cares enough about the young person to be a major influence on his life.

"You," says Proctor, speaking to a group of administrators, "could be such an intervention by the way you run your high school."

I agree with him that we must personally intervene in the lives of children. I also believe that we must change substantially the nature of the schools themselves.

Unrigging in Response to Public Concern

I believe that we can gain public support for some of the unrigging that must be done by capitalizing on the high public, staff, and pupil concern over the status of discipline in our schools. Year after year the Gallup Poll has documented this concern.

The usual response from our profession to this concern has been a request for better building security, more guards in the halls and the washrooms, more rules, more suspensions, more detention rooms, or more dumping ground programs such as work-study programs to get disruptive pupils out of the schools.

The problem with such an approach is that it does not address itself to the causes of our discipline problems. Many of these causes lie within the nature of our society. There is little we can do about that. Other causes lie within the nature of the home. There is little we can do about that, either. But some of the causes of discipline problems lie deeply rooted in the nature of the school itself. These causes can be identified and to some extent can be alleviated through the unrigging process.

The Rigged School as a Cause of Discipline Problems

I'd like to review these causes generally and comment in detail on five of them. How are our schools rigged? I have identified nine ways as follows:

1) The graded school which assigns pupils to classes on the basis of their age. In the graded school successful pupils are permitted to "pass" and unsuccessful pupils are retained or remediated.

2) Standardized testing programs which are designed to identify winners and losers. A loser is defined as one of a certain percentage of pupils destined to do poorly on the test.

3) Strong emphasis on competition in schools as a way of screening out the "least fit" pupils. This practice is often justified on the grounds that we must prepare pupils for our dog-eat-dog society by teaching them to handle failure in a dog-eat-dog school.

4) The use of artificial rewards - including stars on a wall chart, tokens, letter grades, school letters, membership in honor societies, honor rolls, and pins given out in awards assemblies - all depriving pupils of the opportunity of learning for the right reasons.

5) The letter grading system which forces teachers to communicate messages of unworthiness and failure to pupils on a regular basis.

6) Grouping and ranking practices which continuously remind our least successful pupils that the school thinks some pupils are better than they are.

7) The social system among pupils, which is one of the least obvious forms of rigging. The system typically consists of a highly structured, rigid hierarchy of cliques. Pupils identified as a member of one clique often feel "frozen in" -- i.e. unable to transfer to or participate in the activities of other cliques. Being frozen into membership in a low prestige clique is, for many pupils, the ultimate put down.

8) Dumping ground-ism. This is the practice of devising special courses for less worthy pupils, then creating subtle pressures to cause them to enroll.

9) The school's schedule and its program of classes, which is a way of segregating the losers from the winners by limiting pupils' choices regarding what and with whom they will study.

I only have time to comment in detail on five of these components in the rigging process. For openers, let's go back to component #2, which deals with standardized testing. We'll then take a look at #6, grouping practices; #7, the school's social structure; #8, dumping ground-ism; and #9, the schedule and program of classes.

Standardized Testing Programs as a Piece of Rigging

Testing practices have been widely criticized by professional educators, by educational associations, by psychologists, and by the testing companies themselves.

Let me say at the outset that some testing is inevitable and desirable. Obviously I do not want someone operating on my appendix who doesn't know what he's doing. Likewise, lawyers should prove competence before being licensed to practice law; accountants should pass competency tests before they are entrusted the responsibility of keeping track of large sums of money, and brick layers should learn how to lay bricks before being allowed to lay up a wall.

Nor do I have any objections to diagnostic testing when the purpose of the testing is to facilitate learning.

What I object to is a misuse of testing - a rigging of the testing system to purposefully create a losing class. My observations are as follows:

1) The typical standardized, norm-referenced test is designed in such a way that by definition half the pupils taking the test will be found to be below average. Twenty-five percent will obviously fall in the lowest quartile. Such tests guarantee our society a perpetual supply of losers.

2) As large numbers of pupils master competencies measured on standardized tests, those items will be dropped because they do not differentiate well among groups of children. Thus it is never possible for losers to win. They are being judged with a rubber yardstick.

3) Standardized tests typically test only a small portion of those competencies being taught. For example, a recent item-analysis of the math test being taken by one large city's seventh graders showed that 50% of the competencies being tested had not been taught. Such practices are highly discriminatory against pupils who have little opportunity to learn academic competencies outside of school or who have been screened out of academic courses within the school. Most low-income pupils fall in that category.

4) Tests often don't test what they say they do or what people think they do. They are notoriously subject to misuse and misinterpretation. For example, practically all tests test reading in addition to whatever it is they say they test.

5) Tests which are <u>timed</u> tend to discriminate against pupils who come from cultures which do not value time as much as does middle class America. Timed tests also discriminate against the pupil who has mastered the competencies but who, for one reason or another, works slower than others. Tests also favor the clever guesser and the test-wise student. In addition to testing what it is supposed to test, the test tests the test taker's ability to take tests.

6) The vocabulary used in tests tends to be the vocabulary of the majority rather than various minorities of Americans. Assumptions about a person's previous experiences are made on the basis of the usual experiential background of a middle class American.

7) Particularly harmful and irrational are group-administered I. Q. tests. Psychologists typically define I. Q. something like this: I. Q. is that set of abilities measured by an I. Q. test. The test both defines and measures the abilities we are talking about. I find this a particularly interesting piece of circular reasoning.

Of course, standardized testing enjoys great popularity among the public generally. Most people do not understand the limitations. They do not realize that one of the first decisions which test designers must make is what percentage of those taking the test should fail. Everyone thinks that someone else's kid will be crunched.

Grouping and Ranking Practices

Ability and homogenous grouping are two of our most obvious rigging practices. If pupils ever had any doubts about whether or not they are worthy human beings, these doubts will be removed when they are placed in a losers group. Pupils placed in such groups are being subtly told that they are less worthy than their peers.

We now have a number of alternatives to ability and homogeneous grouping which are in common practice and can be implemented rather easily.

One is individualized instruction - the practice of providing for a variety of learning activities for all members of a learning group. The Kettering Foundation-sponsored IGE program provides a large number of practical suggestions for providing for individual differences within heterogeneous groups.

Other commonly-used alternatives are independent study, academic skills learning laboratories, and action learning programs. You are familiar with these approaches, I'm sure.

Some time ago, a colleague of mine, Dr. Joseph Bechard, summarized the research on the effects of ability or homogeneous grouping on learners.[1] Here are a few gems from his study:

1) "Ability grouping produces conflicting evidence of usefulness in promoting scholastic achievement in superior groups, and almost uniformly unfavorable evidence for promoting scholastic achievement in average or low-achieving groups.

2) The effect of ability grouping on the affective development of children is to reinforce favorable self-concepts of those assigned to high achievement groups, but also to reinforce unfavorable self-concepts in those assigned to low achievement groups.

3) Low self-concept operates against motivation for scholastic achievement in all individuals, but especially among those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority groups.

4) The effect of grouping procedures is generally to put low achievers of all sorts together and deprive them of the stimulation of middle-class children as learning models and helpers.

5) Desegregated classes have greatest positive impact on school learning of socioeconomically disadvantaged children when the proportion of middle-class children in the group is highest. Conversely, when socioeconomically disadvantaged children are in the majority in a class, the effect of grouping is commonly to produce poorer achievement on their part.

6) Assignment to low achievement groups carries a stigma that is generally more debilitating than relatively poor achievement in heterogeneous groups."

Bechard's summary of the research on the effects of grouping make it clear that homogeneous grouping is a highly effective way of depriving pupils from

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1 This paper is available on request from my office. Address: Eugene R. Howard, Director, Accreditation and Accountability, Colorado Department of Education, 201 East Colfax, Denver, CO 80203.

low socioeconomic families of the opportunity to succeed in school. Even in a desegregated school system these children are resegregated, labeled, stigmatized, and denied the stimulation of associating closely with middle class pupils. They are frozen into the track.

Related closely to grouping practices are our ranking practices. The ranking of pupils in high school is a particularly demeaning practice, justified, it is said by the demands of college admissions officers. Perhaps. I do not, however, know of any college admissions office that tells you that you have to tell a graduating senior that he ranks 123rd in a class of 125. Very few colleges, in fact, require the absolute numerical rank of a student - especially when other information regarding a pupil's academic capabilities is made available. High school educators should, through their professional associations, insist that college entrance counselors abandon the medieval and inhuman practice of providing a numerical ranking for students seeking admission. If necessary, we need to band together, perhaps through our regional accrediting associations, and simply refuse to generate or provide the information.

The Social System Among Pupils

The clique composition of a school parallels, with some distortion, the clique structure of the community. It is there, in every school, always communicating a message of unworthiness to some pupils; always creating winners and losers. The composition of these cliques, the names given to them, and their place in the hierarchy varies from school to school. Most schools have their equivalents of "eggheads", "greasers", "cowboys", or "jocks". Each clique has well-defined standards for admission to the group and each clique demands its own brand of conformity

of its members. Members violate a group's standards only at their peril. The veiled threat of exclusion from all cliques is always there and always contributing to the process of freezing individuals into the clique.

How does it feel to be frozen into a clique - to belong to one clique and want to belong to a different one?

How does it feel to be frozen out of all of the cliques and to be without friends at the age of 6, 12, or 16?

How does it feel to be told, subtly, of course, that you need to be remediated?

How does it feel to be identified, to yourself and your parents, as being in the lower quartile nationally on a standardized reading test?

How does it feel to graduate 123rd out of a class of 127?

One junior high school I know has the practice of inviting its honor students to dinner once a year. Likewise, the same school invited its athletes and cheerleaders to dinner at the end of each season. How does it feel not to be invited?

Some pupils, then, find themselves in Proctor's downward spiral. Their school environment communicates subtle messages of unworthiness. They respond by achieving less. Lower achievement then reinforces the low self-concept, and we have created more losers.

Those losers who turn against us as children and youth, will vote against us as adults.

Perhaps there is little that school leaders can do to modify the debilitating impact of the clique structure on those individuals in the low prestige groups. We might, however, try these four approaches:

1) Form a task force of staff and pupils to study the clique structure of the school. Each clique should be identified and its admission requirements and behavior requirements for continuing membership defined.

2) Leadership people from each clique might then sit down together to discuss the findings of the study.

3) Task forces to improve the school might be deliberately structured to include representatives from all major cliques.

4) The principal might meet periodically with representatives from all major cliques to discuss with them various school problems and issues. It is better to stimulate communications among clique leaders at a time when there is not a crisis than to try to do it after a crisis has occurred.

We can probably do little to modify the clique structure itself. We can, however, open communications across clique barriers and, on occasion, involve clique leaders in cooperative activities for school improvement. We can also identify those school activities which intensify the negative effect of the clique structure on low-prestige members and modify those activities accordingly.

Dumping ground-ism

I've defined dumping ground-ism as the practice of devising special courses for less worthy pupils, then creating subtle pressures to cause them to enroll. I should explain what I mean.

The most obvious of the dumping ground courses are homemaking, industrial arts, special education, work study, and a variety of vocational courses. The assumption underlying such courses, which are frequently referred to as "non-academic" is that some students are academically oriented and others are not. The academically oriented students are then placed in college-prep courses. Others are taught to do things with their hands.

Now I'm probably going to be misunderstood on this one. I am not opposed to homemaking, industrial arts, vocational courses, or work-study courses. Much of great value is taught in such courses. What I object to is using them as dumping grounds. I object to the value system of the school being rigged in such a way that these courses seem to pupils and parents to be less worthy than others.

I'd like to see industrial arts taught as a subject closely allied with science and math. College-bound kids interested in and talented in science and math need to understand how scientific principles can be applied in actually working with machines and materials. Likewise the pupil who likes to work directly with machines and materials should learn the math and scientific principles related to what he is doing. Industrial arts should be organized as a part of the math-science department of the school. Industrial arts shops should be used by science and math students as action laboratories. Likewise, science labs should be available to industrial arts pupils when the materials and teaching talent there can help them understand the principles behind the applications they are learning.

Under such a system, if an observer were to walk into an industrial arts shop he would see many pupils of varying abilities, interests, and social groups working there. It would no longer be a dumping ground place for pupils who supposedly can't learn academic material.

Similar relationships could be established between academic classes or laboratories and other traditionally dumping ground subjects.

One of the most obvious of the newer dumping grounds is the alternative school. Some alternative schools have, in fact, been plainly labeled as schools for behavior problems and potential drop-outs. Alternative schools should be created, not so that we can ship our problem students out of the building. Rather they should be designed to serve pupils who learn best in environments which are difficult to create in a traditional school building. Pupils, for example, who learn best when

they can participate directly in designing and evaluating their own learning activities and who need the freedom of using the entire community as a classroom might well benefit from their own store-front type alternative. Such students would come from all social classes. Many would be college-bound. Under such circumstances the alternative school is not viewed as a second-rate institution primarily for losers.

The Schedule and the Program of Classes

One way we impose segregation and labeling on pupils is by creating a school day in which choices are so limited that winners are scheduled away from the losers. The system works something like this:

1) Courses required for the college-bound curriculum are designated. They are then designed in such a way that only a portion of the students in the school can benefit from them. The question asked is like this: "Here is a math class. Who should take it and who should not?" The question should be: "Here is a student. What kind of math does he need to learn?"

2) Graduation requirements are then defined so as to require most pupils to enroll for four classes plus P. E.

3) Classes are then scheduled into a six or at most a seven period day.

The result of this little piece of rigging is as follows:

a) A college-bound sophomore fills up his or her schedule, on advice of his counselor, with math, science, English, social studies, a foreign language, and P.E. He or she is unable to take any dumping ground subjects thus assuring us that the segregation will be complete. Of course the college-bound pupils may also be screened out of art of music and may also be deprived of a badly-needed library-study period.

b) A second result is that the loser finds himself or herself with a double period of industrial arts or homemaking, English, P.E., social studies, and a study hall - the minimum to graduate. The assumption is that these individuals have learned all the math and science they can learn by the time they are in the 10th grade. It is also assumed that they cannot learn a foreign language even though many of them and their parents may already speak one. The second class citizen is successfully shielded from further advancement in academic learning.

I regret that a limitation of time has prevented me from commenting on all of the components of the rigged school which I have identified.

I have not commented on the concept of the graded school, a particularly undemocratic Prussian invention which causes failures by ignoring individual differences.

I have not discussed with you the devastating effects of over-competition in the school which teaches pupils that the way to get ahead in the world is to beat out someone else.

I have not commented on all of the petty artificial rewards which we use to manipulate pupils into learning tasks which they wouldn't otherwise be willing to perform. I haven't had time to explore with you how such artificial award-letting phonies up the school promoting game-playing and provides some pupils with daily reminders that they are losers.

I haven't had time to talk about the abominations of the grading system.

SUMMARY

What I have done is to suggest that, with a modest amount of unrigging, we might make a positive impact on our schools' climate and on pupil behavior.

I have suggested that to improve discipline and alienation in schools we should make our schools into more human places, places where pupils learn to care about themselves. and about one another, places where no person is unnecessarily put down, places where people learn how to improve themselves without doing so at the expense of others.

If we have a dog-eat-dog society it is because we have made it so. Badly needed now are people with a more human vision of what our country should be like. We do not need to chew one another up in order to maintain a high standard of living or in a futile attempt to bolster our prestige in the world.

A place to start in the process of redirecting some of the trends which threaten us is with initiating a few modest reforms with our schools - reforms which will widen the winner's circle - reforms which will provide all of our pupils with the degree of respect and dignity they need in order to become self-improving human beings. I have suggested what some of these reforms might be.